



## MEETING REPORT

Monday, June 24, 2002

### **Project Steering Committee Meeting No. 3 – Baseline Opportunities Overview**

***6:00 - 8:00 p.m.***

***Auditorium, West End Multi-Service Center (170 Heights Boulevard)***

The third meeting of the project Steering Committee was opened at approximately 6:00 p.m. by Patricia Rincon-Kallman, Assistant Director of the City of Houston Planning & Development Department.

Meeting discussions and a consultant presentation covered topics including:

- Project status and meeting objectives;
- Overview of the Baseline Opportunities Analysis;
- Ongoing discussion of high-capacity transit (HCT) alignment issues; and,
- Upcoming project meetings and activities.

#### **Project Status and Meeting Objectives**

The consultant team announced that the Existing Conditions chapter had been revised per discussions at the last Steering Committee meeting and was available on the project website.

The consultant team also said that of the initial two alignments, alignment A (northern route through the Heights) was not a good candidate for high-capacity transit and will not be looked at in detail for this study. Therefore, five possible alignments, including the original alignments A and B (Washington to Yale to 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> Street), are under review. The five alignments will be narrowed down to two based on criteria such as cost, engineering/design, and environmental and aesthetic considerations.

#### **Overview of the Baseline Opportunities Analysis**

The principal purpose of the meeting was to review the Baseline Opportunities Analysis chapter. It was emphasized that the preliminary draft distributed this evening was only an interim product. Ongoing analysis of potential redevelopment sites and opportunities, as well as the results of the Development Scenarios Workshop on July 18<sup>th</sup> and completion of case studies of HCT impacts in Dallas and Portland, will fill out this chapter later.

The consultant team made a presentation outlining the contents of the chapter, including data used and analysis results. General questions and comments offered by the Steering Committee during the presentation included the following topics:

- Several Steering Committee members had questions regarding property values and the data used to analyze property values. Questions included whether property with a low value was improved or unimproved, the effect last year's flooding had on property values, the source of information for determining the acreage of parks and open space,



and whether industrial property is considered commercial property. The consultant team used the Harris County Appraisal District's "use codes" to determine property types, and noted that the data have certain limitations.

- The Steering Committee was interested in seeing a ranking of employers by size. The consultant team explained that there is no single source for this data. The Texas Workforce Commission can provide information on the largest employers, but not the number of employees.
- The consultant team discussed peer examples of economic development resulting from HCT, including Portland, Oregon and Dallas, Texas. The consultant team noted that HCT resulted in an increase in single-family residential property values, as well as in other categories such as office and retail. Property values generally increase with improved accessibility.
- The consultant team pointed out that HCT could make Memorial Park even more accessible as a central-city amenity. They also compared Memorial Park to Central Park in New York City, noting that development similar to Central Park was possible around Memorial Park. However, based on Steering Committee comments, the consultant team acknowledged that since IH 610 and IH 10 border Memorial Park, only a limited comparison is possible.
- The consultant team and Steering Committee members discussed the idea of livability. One Steering Committee member noted that many residents initially move to suburbs to find livability but are now returning to the Inner Loop for the same reason. The consultant team said HCT would help bring a sense of livability around transit nodes.
- The perception of HCT in Houston is that it only transports people from their origin to their destination. There is limited focus on economic interaction along the transit lines. The challenge for the consultant team is to determine the economic opportunities associated with stops along the HCT line. The consultant team said there are ways to accomplish both commuter and local transit service without building two lines (for example, limited-stop service during rush hour). A vision for this study is to identify reasons to complement HCT in the Inner Katy corridor with development opportunities.
- Issues relating to the alignment of HCT were discussed. An alignment along IH 10 was not one of the options assigned to the consultant team. The width of Washington Avenue to accommodate HCT, cars and sidewalks was questioned. The consultant team said that an alignment could actually be a block or two north or south of Washington Avenue, such as on Center Street. Displacement of businesses and residences along any alignment is a concern. A minimum of 50 feet of right of way will be needed for an HCT line.
- The impact of construction on small businesses along Washington Avenue was a concern to the Steering Committee. Construction for the CBD-to-Dome line has caused many businesses along Main Street to close. Members fear that construction along Washington would eliminate most of the small business owners and result in



chain stores and strip centers. Steering Committee members were curious how small businesses in the peer cities had been affected by the construction of HCT. The consultant team said most of the studies available address new investments resulting from HCT, not the effect on businesses during construction.

- The Steering Committee asked the consultant team to try to find case studies in which locations implementing HCT were able to preserve their unique nature. The consultant team agreed to look for examples, to the extent that time allows. The consultant team noted one reason light rail failed in Austin was the perceived negative effect the independent business sector thought it would have on them (along South Congress Avenue and elsewhere). However, the consultant team said it would be a mistake to make HCT in Inner Katy an “all or nothing” issue, as in Austin.
- The Washington on Westcott (WOW) Roundabout representative confirmed for the Steering Committee that WOW is having ongoing discussions with the City of Houston and project consultants and is not opposed to HCT so long as a future line will not have a negative affect on the planned roundabout.
- As in previous meetings, some Steering Committee members questioned the overall purpose and limitations of the study. There was continued discussion of the different development scenarios that would be associated with local neighborhood-oriented transit service versus longer-distance commuter service (which might be more appropriate along the Katy Freeway, for example). The consultant team and METRO representatives emphasized that METRO will use this study, along with other necessary environmental and feasibility studies, when planning HCT in the corridor, and Councilmember Vasquez is steadfast about having a say in the location of HCT in the corridor. However, the ultimate focus of this study is transit-oriented development potential, which requires certain assumptions about where and how such future transit service might occur. This study will provide important input for future detailed decisions about transit investments, but those decisions will not be made through this study. The consultant team has a clearly-defined scope of work; however, if neither of the alignments used for the study appear feasible for transit and/or economic development reasons, the consultant team will say so.

The consultant team will incorporate the recommended changes as work continues on the Baseline Opportunities Analysis chapter.

### **Upcoming Project Meetings and Activities**

The schedule for upcoming Steering Committee meetings was discussed. Tentative dates for the final two Steering Committee meetings are August 22<sup>nd</sup> and September 4<sup>th</sup>. The Small Group Development Scenarios Workshop will be held on Thursday, July 18<sup>th</sup> at the Love Park Community Center. The Town Hall Meeting for presentation of the final study results is shown on September 11<sup>th</sup>, but this will likely change given expected commemorations and events that day.